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ABSTRACT

Business language is directed both outward, toward the general public and inward, toward the particular type of business. In the first instance, it approximates lay language and has contributed some expressions to common usage. In the second instance, it departs from lay language and becomes specialized within each industry, sometimes to the point of mutual unintelligibility. However, this distinction is largely lexical and not grammatical, and is largely written and less commonly found in spoken forms. Common business language is found within the area of conventionalized transactions governed by the courtesies and formalities of business life, which are almost universal. The choice of appropriate form is determined by subject matter, the occasion, and shared knowledge and social relations of the communicators, and is heavily dependent on an internal knowledge of the business. Spoken and written communications are very different in business, and each deserves separate treatment in instruction. Those involved in teaching business English should consider building and analyzing a corpus of oral business language. (MSE)

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DEFINING BUSINESS ENGLISH

(Given at IATEFL Conference, Brighton, 2 April 1986)

After last year's meeting, I sat down to write an article for the LCCIEB house journal, COMLON, attempting to clarify in my own mind what was meant by Business English. Many of you will have already read this article, and I have spare copies of it here.

I will not, therefore, attempt to regurgitate that, but to go a little further. You already know what 'Business English' is, and the purpose of defining it is not to identify it but to relate it systematically to what else we know about language and language teaching.

However, to begin with I ought to summarise my main conclusions. The arguments for these conclusions can be found in the article.

1. Business language looks two ways -

   outwards towards the general public

   and

   inwards towards the particular type of business.

2. In the first respect, therefore, it approximates to lay language and has, indeed, given a large number of figurative expressions now in common use in lay language, eg 'to cash in on earlier success', 'to repay a compliment with interest', etc.

3. In the second respect, however, it departs more and more from lay language, to the point where the specialised language of say, insurance, would be unintelligible to someone steeped in the specialised language of say, textiles, and vice versa.

4. These distinctions, however, relate largely to lexis, much less to grammar; largely to the written forms and much less to the spoken.

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5. Where an area of truly common business language can be identified, however, is in a twilight zone binding the two, a linguistic world of 'forms and frameworks' of conventionalised transactions, governed by the courtesies and formalities of business life, which are to a large extent universal. This is not to say that they are the same from one language to another, but rather that all languages agree in having a convention for concluding a deal, making an enquiry, requesting payment, calling in a bad debt, threatening legal action, seeking a discount, seeking an agency agreement, etc.

6. In other words, while there is a grammar and lexis peculiar to business language, its main content is sociolinguistic, a matter of choosing from a repertory of conventional frameworks that which is most appropriate to the type of business communication being entered upon.

7. The appropriate form will show sensitivity to:subject matter, the occasion, shared knowledge and social relations holding between companies and communicators, and therefore a knowledge of business language will be heavily dependent on a knowledge of business - from the inside. We approach here the realm of ethnomethodology, which studies conventional transactions between human groups.

8. The result of these conclusions was a diagram, which I am afraid was rendered inscrutable by the printer of the published article. I have an OHP transparency of the original, however, which I hope will be more explanatory.

Register/Style/Domain, etc

In a long digression I looked at the term register and related synonyms and found that:

(a) Several incompatible definitions exist, all meaning broadly:

Variety, according to -

subject matter (Quirk & Greenbaum)
or
occupation (Mackay, Hymes)
or
situation/occasion (Crystal & Davey (style), Beauregarde & Dressler, Turner, Brooks)
or
social roles & relations (Bell)
or
use of the language (Stern, Bell)
or
formal characteristics (Halliday, Mackintosh, Strevens)

(b) Business English fitted none of these exclusively but embraced all and probably transcended them.

(c) It therefore contributes nothing to our knowledge of Business English to call it a 'register', 'style' or 'domain'.

(d) It is better to retain the term 'variety' - 'occupational variety', if you like - since it consists of:

'choices from both a general and a special linguistic repertory, motivated by: subject matter, situation, occasion, channel, social roles and relations.'

(e) Teaching business English will therefore consist of:

(1) Providing these repertories (lexis, grammar, conventions, etc)

(2) Sensitising students to the factors that influence choice from them

(3) Practising them in both together so that the correct choice becomes automatic.

(f) I might add, as a matter of my personal interest, that **TESTING** Business English will therefore consist of constraining candidates to make the right choices by putting them into analogues of business communication situations, and this has been the concept underlying the revisions to the LCCIEB's 'English for Commerce Syllabus', to be known as 'English for Business'.

Channels/Modes

An important difference in business English is that between speech and writing.

There are umpteen books on the market on how to write letters, memos, telegrams, etc, and for a long time business English has been considered essentially a matter of the written word.

However, much less attention has been paid to business speech. If you hear your accountant say 'I have purchased (buy) a railway ticket, or 'I will forward (send) you a postcard from my holiday resort', or 'I'm sorry I'm overdue (late) for this meeting', you detect the influence of written business style on speech. This is not something we would want to teach, and it is not what I mean by business English speech. On the other hand, there are oral collocations peculiar to business speech, and not necessarily represented in writing, which should be taught: eg the way of grouping telephone numbers when giving them over the phone; such formulae as 'have you got that?', 'let me just recap', 'off the record' (if you wrote 'off the record', it would be on the record!), 'I beg to differ', 'could you bear with me a moment?', etc. Beyond that there are verbal routines that have no counterpart in writing and yet are recognised essentials of business communication, eg a salesman anticipating objections:

Speaker: "I can hear you say: why is this so costly"

anticipates

Hearer: "I wonder why it is so expensive"

or, interrupting and querying

eg "That's not what you said the last time you were here"

"Excuse me, could you just clarify what you mean by 'estoppel'?"

"It's a while since I read the file. Could you just refresh my memory?"

or

evading questions and objections

"No comment"
"A statement will be issued shortly"

"I don't accept the presuppositions behind your question."

The immediate constraints of the face-to-face or voice-to-voice situation give such routines a status of their own, quite separate from written formulae.

I would suggest that this is the aspect of business English most in need of clarification. The discourse analysis of a large number of recorded authentic business conversations would, I believe, enable us to categorise a lot of language as

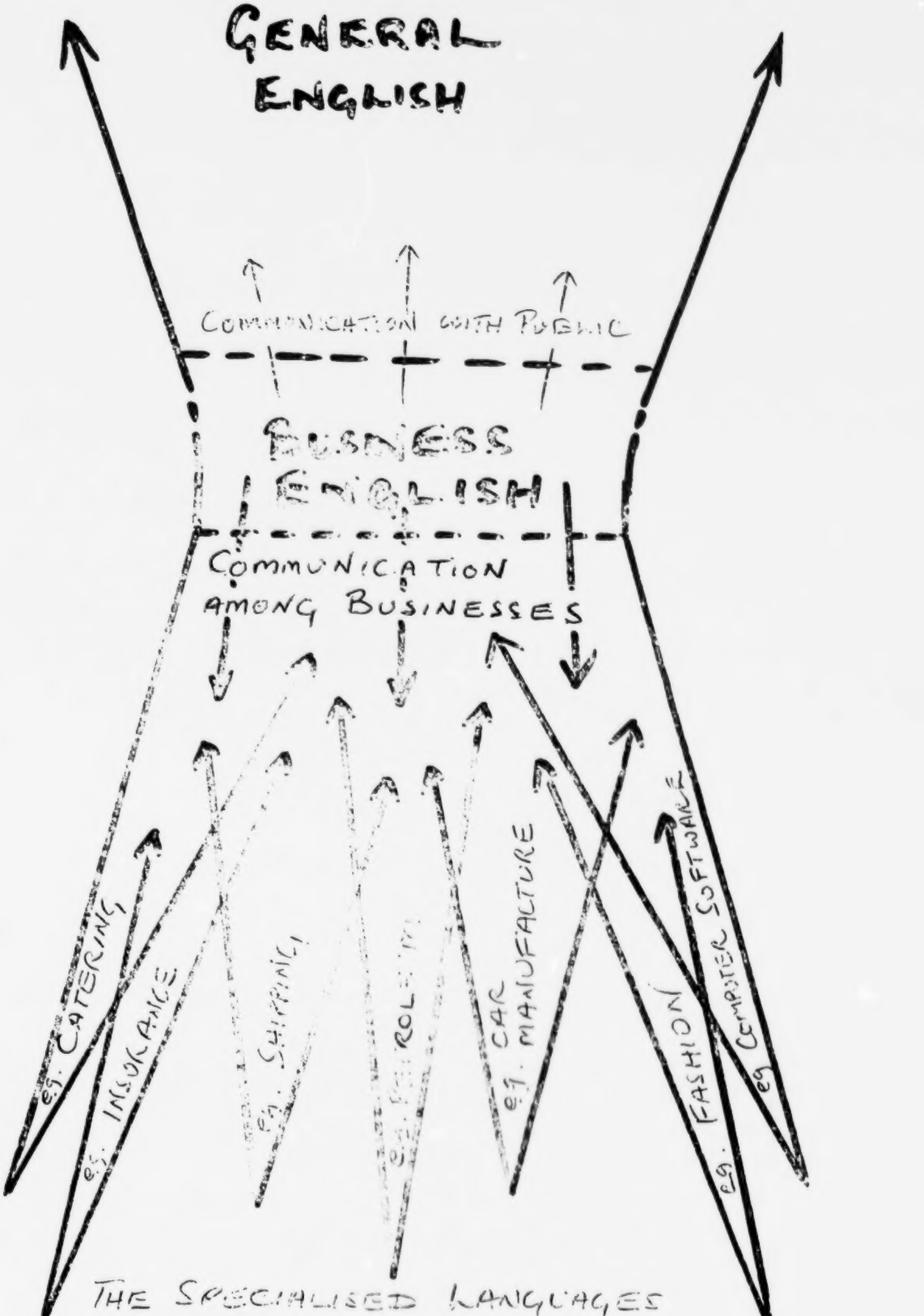
either General

or Business

and the Business could be sub-categorised into:

1. Spoken but not written
2. Both spoken and written
3. Incongruously transferred from written to spoken.

Each, it seems to me, deserves its own peculiar treatment in teaching.



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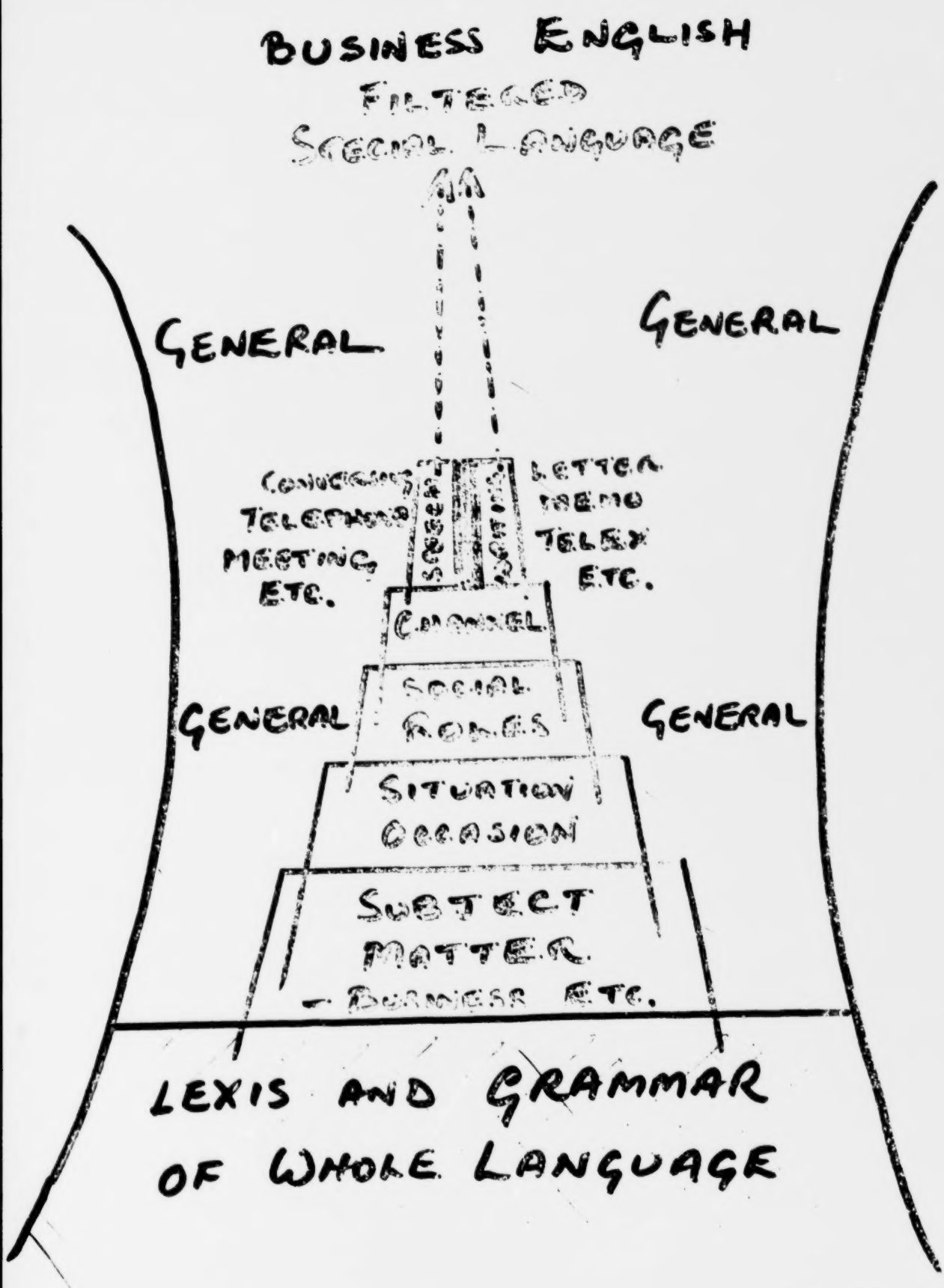

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I suggest that the Business English group might like to look into the possibility of building up and analysing such an oral corpus, with a view to developing teaching materials that lay a more even stress on the oral parts of business communication. Books aiming to do this exist, but they are not, as far as I know, terribly systematic, comprehensive, or sufficiently numerous.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I should like to project two transparencies.

The first shows business language as a whole, and its status as mediating between the language of the general public and the language of particular businesses. It represents a common half-way house, shading off into both.

The second transparency shows the emergence of a single business utterance selected from a whole language repertory by the successive application of constraints such as subject, situation, role, channel and mode.

If this helps our Special Interest Group to stake out its territory and relate it to other strands in language teaching, the task I set myself will have been accomplished.

DR G D PICKETT
April 1986

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